

Agnes Sorrel Forbes

A MEMOIR



Agnes Sorrel Forbes

A Pioneer Missionary
to the Peace River
District

BY
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W. D.

PREFACE

WE are deeply indebted to Rev. Dr. Forbes for the information regarding Mrs. Forbes' early life, also photos and snap-shots. Much of her life in Canada has already been written, but we trust the story of her earnest, buoyant girlhood, the fulfilment of her ideals and her early devoting that young life to the Master's work will encourage other young women of like aspirations to press on to a life of like devotion and service.

JANET BREMNER.

Edmonton.

May, 1921.

INTRODUCTION

IT is a sad pleasure to write this tribute to my friend Agnes Sorrel Forbes. Previous to her coming, in 1895, the nearest Presbyterian minister's wife had been in Calgary, two hundred miles away, and when Mrs. Forbes came to Fort Saskatchewan, twenty miles away, she seemed a near neighbor, and her rare quality compensated for the lack in numbers.

She was one of nature's noblewomen, highly endowed, educated and refined, a heroine who gave her life to the full for this part of the Canadian West. The energy and high spirits of earlier years never left her, she was ever enthusiastic and painstaking with a genius for home making. What that entails on the wife of a Western Home Missionary, in cooking, house-keeping and entertaining, only one who has been through it knows.

She was a born leader and was equally at home with rich or poor, cultured or ignorant, but able to see the good in all. With a keen sense of humor which carried her triumphantly through many a difficult situation, she possessed a striking personality and winsome manner.

As one who visited at the Fort Saskatchewan manse expressed it, the sunshine and brightness which radiated from her were the outward sign of the spirit-filled life of loving service to the Master whom she so unswervingly served. Her interests were many-sided and her true greatness showed itself in her influence over all whom she met. For fifteen years we met often and formed a close friendship, but the difficulties of the trail were such that our meetings were few after she went to Grande Prairie. The last was in '16, when she attended the Council Meeting in Winnipeg, during those never-to-be-forgotten June days.


Another year of service and her work was done. "With an unflinching trust," and busy to the last day and hour, she "rested from her labors," but her life is perpetuated in the lives and homes of hundreds of men and women to whose bodies and souls she ministered in their need and loneliness.

May the reading of her life lead many and particularly the girls and younger women who are deciding their life work, to follow in her footsteps in as far as she followed her Master, and consecrate their lives, their gifts and their talents to God for His work.

CATHERINE McQUEEN.

The Manse, Edmonton, Alberta,

May 2nd, 1921.



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Agnes Sorrel Forbes

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CHAPTER I

HER EARLY LIFE

THE town of Montrose, on the East Coast of Scotland, was the scene of the childhood of Agnes Sorrel Forbes.

Her parents were, Margaret Burness, from Drumtochty, and John Sorrel, from the South Border Country. To them were born four sons and five daughters, of whom Agnes was the youngest.

Mr. Sorrel was a cabinet maker and upholsterer, supplying efficiently the requirements both of the gentry and the plainer folk. As the family grew every means was used for their development and education.

Agnes possessed a superabundance of energy and high spirits and was considered rather a "tom-boy" by the family. The girls often spent their holidays with their friends at Fettercairn, near Drumtochty. In their play, when any misdemeanors occurred that required reproof or correction, the blame usually fell on Agnes. One relative "Aunt Louise" who was regarded by the girls as "a pernickety old maid," was the source of much trouble to them, by constantly correcting and reproving them for their unladylike manners, and frequently curtailing their holiday freedom.

In those days, as well as now, there was much to interest young people, but in this home godly parents kept strict oversight of all the activities of their children.

Agnes attended many parties in private homes and became so absorbed in pleasure that her mother grew very anxious about her. She was in the habit of mentioning the names of all her children at the family altar morning and evening, and Agnes became a special subject. But her mother's heart was made glad, when one Sabbath on her return from church she expressed a wish to teach in the Sabbath School. For over a year she taught a class regularly, still attending all the parties and social functions as usual. One night she came home with a troubled heart and went right to her mother, who told her God might be going to deal with

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her for living such a giddy life. She was very unhappy and despondent.

About that time an epidemic of diphtheria broke out in the town. John, her eldest brother, died from the disease, and Maggie her favorite sister, who was within two weeks of her marriage, also contracted it. As Agnes nursed her, Maggie pleaded with her to give her heart to Jesus. Maggie's death made a great impression on the neighborhood for she was beloved by all for her beautiful Christian character and winsomeness.

After Maggie's death, Agnes seemed to lose all her buoyancy, and was very depressed, in spite of the efforts of her godly father and mother to comfort her. She lost all interest in life, saying, "I am tired of life and want to go to Maggie, but I know God would reject me. I've never learned to love Jesus and have been very rebellious." Her mother listened in silence and tears. One day, taking her young daughter to her own room, she opened her Bible at the eleventh chapter of Matthew, and pointing to the last three verses left her alone. For two hours Agnes remained repeating again and again: "Come unto Me," until gradually the invitation came to *her*, the light dawned and her soul understood as it never had before. She arose from her knees and went to her mother who was waiting and praying for her. "Mother," she said, "it is all right now. I can see it, and if I were called tonight God would receive me. I believe God has work for me to do for Him in this world yet, and I am going to do it." And that resolve was faithfully fulfilled up to the close of her wonderful life!

Teaching her class was no longer a burden but a joy, but it was not enough. After Sunday School was over, she would be found going from house to house in the poorer parts of the town, with her Bible in her hand. If she was rebuffed and refused entrance she would go back at another time. If she was welcomed in the home she brought joy and happiness. On Sabbath evenings it was the practice of the family to sit around the fireplace discussing the work done and the impressions received during the day. As Agnes related her

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experiences, sometimes a smile would pass over the faces of the others, but the mother's heart was stirred as she remembered the past.

Her brother David and Mr. Geo. Kidd, of Forfar, a Y.M. C.A. worker, who afterwards became Agnes' brother-in-law, soon became intensely interested. They engaged a room in one of the slum districts and started Sabbath evening services.

The first night was rather discouraging, the room being poorly lighted and comfortless. But the next night the room was well lighted, clean and warm and they had a good meeting. That night much joy was in the hearts around the fireside, as the story was told. But disappointment was in store, they discovered the room was *pre-occupied*. But nothing daunted, they hired another room, taking every precaution to assure its cleanliness. They enlisted some friends of the congregation to help with the singing, and Mr. Graham, an elder of St. Paul's, and before long the meetings made themselves felt in the district. Visits were made during the week among the fisher folk, to whom they gave material help. This went on for several years and there were many trophies of grace in that part of the town, one being a woman much addicted to drink, who came frequently to the meetings in a disorderly state, but being lovingly dealt with and prayed for, after a time, was impressed, and became a Christian and a great power for good in the mission.

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CHAPTER II

EARLY MISSIONARY WORK

ABOUT this time a spiritual movement was going on in Dundee. Agnes Sorrel, having occasion to visit Dundee learned of the interest that was gathering about Mary Slessor. The two met frequently and parted with the intention of both applying to the Foreign Missionary Committee to be sent to the Foreign Field. Mary Slessor chose Africa and Agnes Sorrel, India. In the course of time Mary Slessor was sent to Africa.

While Agnes Sorrel was waiting an appointment to India, she was led to consider special mission work at home, being asked to assist in a Rescue Home in Edinburgh. As she had a deep sympathy for girls who had been led astray, she accepted the position. Not long after she was urged to take charge of a Rescue Home in Aberdeen and for eight years she labored in the Sea Bank Home for fallen women.

Many interesting stories might be told of her experience there. Some of the worst cases of the town and country came under her influence and turned out well. It was said that surely Miss Sorrel must have a charmed life as she could go alone to search for girls in places where it was not safe for one policeman to go.

The Free Church, old Aberdeen, was the church Miss Sorrel attended and to which she took her girls. The precentor in that church was a young student of King's College, Mr. Alexander Forbes. He was glad to add to his slender income in this way. Seeing and hearing of Miss Sorrel's great work, he offered his services to teach singing to the girls of the Home. The committee considered it a good idea and accepted his offer. The services were much appreciated by these girls into whose lives so little pleasure came.

A mutual interest ripened into a mutual understanding and in time Miss Sorrel and Mr. Forbes plighted their troth to each other. When this became known at the Home much sorrow was expressed at the prospect of losing their dear Miss

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Sorrel and resentment was felt by some toward the "singing master," who was to take her away. One of the most daring showed her feelings by punching her fingers through Mr. Forbes' hat, which was hung in the hall. The owner could only smile as he went home that night with a cool head but a ruined hat.

When the time came to consider their life service both were agreed on the Foreign Field. On the eve of being sent abroad, while they were waiting appointment by the Foreign



The First Manse on Grande Prairie, at Flying Shot

Mission Committee of the Free Church of Scotland, there arrived from Canada the Rev. Dr. Robertson and the Rev. C. W. Gordon, better known as "Ralph Connor." They were commissioned by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada to visit the Old Country and if possible, secure men and money for the work in Canada. Their story was an interesting one and showed the needs of the settlers of the west. When Mr. Forbes expressed his interest in Canada, Mr. Gordon interviewed the Principal of King's College, with the result that Mr. Forbes was asked to go to Canada. When

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he consulted Miss Sorrel with regard to her wishes: "Oh," she said, "not to cold inhospitable Canada" (though many of her relatives were already there). But the thought was only momentary and with her usual missionary spirit she was willing to go anywhere for the cause of Christ. After prayerful consideration the way became clear, and a year later, in September, 1895, in the old Presbyterian Church in Edmonton, Mr. Forbes and Miss Sorrel were united in marriage by Rev. D. G. McQueen. Mr. Forbes was appointed missionary to Fort Saskatchewan, and Mrs. Forbes entered upon her work with her usual enthusiasm. The manse to which Mr. Forbes brought his bride was a one-roomed shack formerly used as an office for a lumber yard where Mr. Forbes had begun his entirely new experience of "baching." It was not long before Mrs. Forbes changed his mode of living; the shack became a manse open to all who came, either to enjoy its hospitality, or to bring their troubles and receive ever-ready sympathy and advice.

It was soon felt that a new church and manse were needed. The little log church, built in Mr. McQueen's time had served its noble purpose. Settlers were coming in and the work was growing. Mr. Forbes, realizing there was very little money in the country, but that material was near at hand and the people were willing to help in cutting and hauling the logs, was quick to see a solution of the difficulty. Men from the surrounding country gladly offered their services, and Mrs. Forbes rose to the occasion, and turning the church into a restaurant, provided substantial meals for all who came to work on the building. It was a great day for all when the church was finished and Mr. McQueen came down from Edmonton to open it.

Not long after the manse was built and the missionary and his wife moved into it and it soon became a centre of home life and comfort to the settlers for miles around.

This kind of work, with the travelling and visting in the winter time, was entirely new to Mrs. Forbes and she had her own difficulty in adapting herself to her new life and surroundings. In those days choice roasts were not delivered at the

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back door by the butcher's boy and the big frozen quarter of beef so difficult for the Canadian matron to handle, was a bug-bear to Mrs. Forbes. On one occasion when her husband was attending Presbytery in Edmonton he sent her word that he was bringing the clerk of Presbytery down to dinner that evening. The meat at once became the problem; all else was easy. In her attempt to cut off a piece she tried the knife, next the axe and then the saw, but had to give up in despair. Then she started out through the deep snow to her friend, Mrs. Ross, and told her of her dilemma. Mrs. Ross gave her a piece of meat ready for the oven. She hurried home and when the ministers arrived at 8 o'clock, they found a warm dinner as well as a warm welcome awaiting them.

On another occasion she had a different experience. On returning from a round of visits in order to relieve her hands of parcels to unlock the door, she put the key in her mouth! With a temperature of 30 degrees below zero the result was that it was weeks before her lips were thoroughly healed.

Her training course in medicine and nursing in Glasgow, after leaving Sea Bank was most helpful in her work among the people at the Fort. She was frequently called to homes where there was illness, and many attributed their return to health to her care.

On one occasion an epidemic broke out and as there was no hospital, she secured an empty building and some willing helpers. The house was converted into an emergency hospital with the result that only one death occurred.

She welcomed to the manse, teachers, mounted police, men and officers, clerks and young people away from home and it became a real home to them all. One case where both parents died leaving a family of seven children was very sad. Mrs. Forbes immediately took them all to the manse, cleaned, clothed and fed them for months until relatives from the States came and took away five of them.

Such was the story of fifteen years at Fort Saskatchewan. The work on the whole was straight Home Mission work, extending over a wide area, the kind of work that almost every Home Missionary and his faithful wife, in the North West are doing.

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Close ties of friendship were formed between the manse in Edmonton and the one in Fort Saskatchewan, which lasted throughout the years. Mr. and Mrs. McQueen had preceded the Forbes' by several years, and the benefit of their experience gladly given, proved a great help during the years of stress and strain.

Mrs. Forbes kept in close touch with all her husband's territory, carrying on Sunday School at two different points and occasionally taking a service at out-stations when her husband was on duty elsewhere. She was ever faithful in promoting missionary interest, and early organized a W. H. M. Society and a Young Woman's Missionary Circle which increased in numbers, under the supervision of those who were long associated with her and is still active.

In 1908 the people of the Fort showed their appreciation of the minister and his wife, by presenting them with a sum of money for a trip to Scotland. About this time a family in the congregation suffered bereavement. Both father and mother died from tuberculosis. A year later one of the daughters, who had developed the same malady, wrote Mrs. Forbes, who immediately took her to the manse and did everything possible for her, but she lived only one month. Her last request was that Mrs. Forbes would take her only sister, who would be left homeless and alone at her death. The request needed no pleading and again the home was opened to the homeless, and the sister was taken into the home. She too, soon began to droop, but Mrs. Forbes took her to Scotland, and the sea voyage, and tender care gave the girl new life. She returned with restored health and a few years later was married.

Such was Mrs. Forbes' life. She was ever ready to do good to others. In cases of family disagreements, intemperance and other troubles her advice and helpful sympathy were constantly sought. Her wonderful faith in prayer, and her life of close communion with the Master brought to her many a sorrowing heart which went away comforted through the realization of the Father's love and care and greater trust in Him.

CHAPTER III

GRANDE PRAIRIE

IN the summer of 1909 there was a great movement of settlers going into the country north and west of Edmonton, as the day of South African scrip was drawing to a close. Peace River country in general and Grande Prairie in particular, attracted many settlers and the Church wishing to follow them up, the Presbytery asked Mr. Forbes, Home Mission Conventer, to go out and look over the district, both as to the settlement of the country and the need of Church influences. Although he knew that this trip would entail much sacrifice and great bodily fatigue, Mr. Forbes accepted the responsibility and on August 10th, 1909, with Mrs. Forbes, set out on the long journey. Though they encountered many hardships, who can estimate what courage and good cheer they must have brought to many a lonely heart as they passed on their way.

They started with a span of ponies, a buck-board piled high with food and bedding and a tent—very light outfit when compared with the in-going settlers' outfits drawn on big lumber wagons by draft horses, with extra horses to relieve them.

After reaching Athabasca Landing, they took a boat up the River to Lesser Slave Lake. After resting a few days, they set out on a 90 mile drive, over an exceedingly rough road, through swamp and bush. More than once Mrs. Forbes had to get out so that the ponies could draw the buckboard out of the mud and they even had, on one occasion, to unload it before it could be moved. Such incidents were enough to discourage any woman, yet Mrs. Forbes could always see the bright and even the funny side of things. When they finally reached Peace River Crossing, Mrs. Forbes wrote: "Too tired to sleep, but it was a joy to remember the object of our mission, and we breathed a silent prayer to Him who was unmistakably going before us."

On they journeyed again past Dunvegan and Spirit River till they reached Beaver Lodge, Grande Prairie. Here the

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first religious service in the district was conducted by Mr. Forbes. There were 23 present. The service was a touching one and the people seemed very anxious to have regular services. At Flying Shot they got a royal welcome from the Cliffords. Mrs. Clifford was one of the three white women then on the Prairie and with her Mrs. Forbes formed a lasting friendship.

After thoroughly investigating conditions and needs Mr.



The Church at Grande Prairie

and Mrs. Forbes began their return journey, which was as eventful as their journey out had been. Every Sabbath, as opportunity offered, Mr. Forbes gathered the few settlers together for service at their halting places. The roads were as bad as ever. At one very difficult point they met the mail-carrier in a big wagon drawn by heavy horses taking in a Hudson's Bay Inspector. Recognizing Mr. and Mrs. Forbes, Inspector McGregor said: "Mr. Forbes, you'll never get through with that small light outfit, the road is so rough and stumpy, and there is a forest fire raging 50 miles ahead of you." They listened to his discouraging story in silence. At

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length Mrs. Forbes in her bright cheery manner said: "Oh yes, we'll get through. We're Scotch, you know." Mr. McGregor recognized the courage and laughed heartily.

There were many real dangers on that trail, but though the smile did not always appear, the faith was there and the forest echoed with the song of praise at the worship every night and morning by the camp fire.

At Athabasca Landing people became very anxious about them. It was known they were coming by trail and their friends feared it would be impossible for them to get through the fiercely burning bush-fire. A search party of Mounted Police was being formed, when to the great joy of their friends, Mr. and Mrs. Forbes drove into the Landing. They had a thrilling story to tell of how they had to chop their way through and how Mrs. Forbes had to help lift the fallen logs to make a way for the ponies, and how they had eaten the last bit of their provisions that morning..

They arrived at the Fort in October, having been away over two months and travelled 1,300 miles, 300 by water and 1,000 by team! The trip was a great success. All along the way from the few white people and the natives they had received a hearty welcome and an earnest request to return.

Mr. Forbes' report to Presbytery impressed all who listened with the need of sending out a missionary at once, and Mr. Forbes was asked to be the first missionary to the great new country. After some consideration their reply was, "we are ready to go."

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CHAPTER IV

LEAVING FORT SASKATCHEWAN

IT was a great wrench to leave the Fort. Fifteen years of earnest, prayerful work had resulted in a church and manse free of debt, and an earnest and loyal congregation. It was not merely striking tents but tearing up the roots imbedded in the hearts of the people.

The manse was dismantled. Only those household effects could be taken, which were absolutely necessary, the rest had



Mrs. Forbes' Bible Class

to be stored or given away. Sleighs were loaded with food, bedding and clothing sufficient to last for two years or more. To a woman who loved home life it was hard to part with articles that she had cherished for years, and to come out of the house filled with many tender memories, and shut the door for the last time.

The people of the town gathered round the manse to say good-bye. As Mrs. Forbes was standing in the door of the caboose, a little boy rushed up with his beautiful little collie puppy, saying: "Here Mrs. Forbes, take my puppy, he will be company for you when you're lonely." The gift was indeed a happy thought and fulfilled the intention of the giver.

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On February 21st, 1910, they started again on their long journey. Mr. Forbes himself drove the caboose. Everything was arranged so as to give as much comfort day and night as possible. The first night spent in the caboose the temperature was 40 degrees below zero.

At Athabasca Landing they began a journey of 400 miles on the ice. It was a relief to Mrs. Forbes to get on the smooth ice as it was very difficult for her to perform her household duties in the caboose, particularly cooking, while driving on the rough roads. Mishaps often occurred. One day, while taking a rice pudding out of the oven, the caboose gave a great jolt and she was thrown down *into* the pudding. It was a great disappointment, as that dessert was a favorite one of Mr. Forbes.

From Mrs. Forbes' letters we learn that she was called on to minister to cases of illness on the way; a little girl with bronchitis, an Indian with pneumonia, a man with an injured knee, and so on.

At Mirror Landing Mr. and Mrs. Forbes overtook the teamsters with their freight, and from there wired their friends of their progress. Mrs. Forbes writes from Mirror Landing: "Have just had a call from Mrs. McLeod, wife of superintendent of Telegraph connections. I greatly enjoyed her visit, it came like a ray of sunshine, for one meets so few women, and fewer kindred spirits on these winter trails."

On reaching Lesser Slave Lake they were warmly welcomed by Dr. and Mrs. Donald, formerly of Fort Saskatchewan. Mrs. Forbes says: "It was delightful to have Mrs. Donald next day for lunch in the caboose."

Here the weather changed and got very warm. The men who had driven our teams and freight from the Fort became anxious and decided to return, in case the river should break up. They were fortunate in securing experienced men to take the place of these freighters. From there on the trails became bare, especially the hills, which made hauling very hard. The ice too, began to show signs of breaking up, and by the time they reached the Simonette River, water was running two feet deep on the rapidly thawing ice. They could

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go no further. Many parties on the trail making for the same destination were held up at the same place. The party consisted of 25 men and two women, Mrs. Rae, wife of the present representative of Peace River and Mrs. Forbes. Hauling their belongings on to high ground they awaited the going out of the ice. It went out one night with a mighty rush, causing the water to reach almost to the camps. Rafts were then made and after all the floating ice was passed, the "voyageurs," having loaded them pushed off from the banks



The Caboose and First Hospital

to risk their lives and belongings in that treacherous stream.

All went well till the afternoon of the first day, when one of the rafts struck a submerged tree. Part of the raft was broken and the shock caused a man to fall overboard. He was rescued with difficulty. Mrs. Forbes and Mrs. Rae and her boy, who were on the raft were somewhat startled. They pulled ashore to repair the raft and found that two parcels belonging to the Forbes had fallen off into the river at the time of the accident. One was seen caught on a rock and two

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men waded out and recovered it. It contained a set of furs given Mrs. Forbes by the congregation at the Fort, her Bible and her notes by the way. The other, which was not recovered, contained clothing and footwear to serve for a year or two. Mrs. Forbes was left with only what she had then on her feet and that one pair of stockings had to do continuous service. She darned them again and again, and wore mocassins all summer to save her one pair of boots. As soon, however, as the ladies of Toronto and Edmonton heard of her loss, she was immediately supplied with abundance of shoes and stockings. Mrs. Forbes told a friend that when the stockings arrived, she cried over them like a child, she was so glad to get them.

They camped both nights beside huge fires where they were warmed and their clothes dried, and the women prepared the meals. The third night they reached the Smoky River and sailed into Bezanson with "flying colors." They were taken into the house of Mr. Bezanson, the first pioneer of that district, who had heard of their coming and was prepared to receive them. The warm welcome, warm house and hot supper was long remembered. Thanks to the kindness of Mr. Bezanson and the resourcefulness of the party they eventually reached Flying Shot, Grande Prairie, where a warm welcome was again awaiting Mr. and Mrs. Forbes, from the Cliffords. Hearing of their prospective return to Flying Shot the Cliffords had prepared a shack 18 x 20 feet for their occupation. This Mrs. Forbes soon made homelike. Writing of her experience at the end of the long hard journey, she says: "These things do not discourage us, we are well and happy and hopeful. Already we are beginning to see some good coming out of them all. The services on the Sabbath, and personal interviews with our companions in travel and difficulties have already yielded some fruit."

The journey from Fort Saskatchewan to Grande Prairie had taken 73 days. The same distance was covered by the Committee of Presbytery in May, 1918, in Pullman coaches to Spirit River, and by train to Grande Prairie in 32 hours. And now in 1921 the distance may be covered in two and a half or three hours by aeroplane.

CHAPTER V

THE WORK IN GRANDE PRAIRIE

MRS. Forbes soon found plenty of work at her door, ministering to the sick and caring for the lonely. But this in addition to her other duties was too great for her physical powers and towards the end of the summer she appealed to the W. H. M. S. of Edmonton, for a nurse. Action was at once taken and Miss Baird, a nurse with missionary zeal and pioneer experience agreed to undertake the work.

As the season was well advanced and navigation about to close, haste was necessary. The Hudson's Bay Company and Revillion Bros., both interested in the north country, gave material aid, and Mr. J. K. Cornwall, of the Northern Transportation Company, provided free transportation, and showed her every kindness and courtesy.

Miss Baird left on October 2nd, 1910 and on her way ministered to many sick people. December found her at Flying Shot when her real work began.

Mr. Forbes had tried to secure a small piece of land without homesteading, but failing in his attempt, filed on a quarter section adjoining the present town of Grande Prairie. They removed to this claim in the spring of 1911. Here in the caboose in which she had travelled, and a tent kitchen, began the work of this noble woman, which continued till the end, and is held in precious memory by the pioneers of Grande Prairie.

Later a small log building was erected and devoted entirely to hospital work. Here Miss Baird had her own room. This was called the Pioneer Hospital of Grand Prairie, the caboose being used as the Forbes' bedroom and a small building of boards with canvas roof serving as dining-room and kitchen. There the meals for the patients were cooked and many a weary traveller was fed and comforted. Next year a log house 24 x 24 was added to the Hospital, which proved a great

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comfort, as it saved going out of doors to serve meals in the Hospital.

The Hospital was always full and taxed the patience and skill of Mrs. Forbes and Miss Baird to the utmost. This added to the home and church work was a great strain on body and mind and resulted in great weariness and many sleepless nights. Mrs. Forbes suffered much from rheumatism



First Patients in Grande Prairie Hospital

and a change was so necessary that a holiday "out" was welcomed, and she and Miss Baird in the caboose travelled over the weary and hazardous Edson trail to Edmonton. The change and pleasure of meeting old friends soon relieved the rheumatism and brought back the joy of living. Writing of this trip in the *Pioneer* of March, 1914, Mrs. Forbes says:—

"Four years ago this month we left the first home in the land of our adoption to lay the foundation of missions in Grande Prairie, and this is my first holiday. The first time we headed for Grande Prairie to spy out the country, we travelled by Peace River crossing, Dunvegan and Spirit River.

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The second time we went in by Sturgeon Lake to settle. Now we have the far famed Edson trail, the shortest route, but we are still 260 miles from a railway station. The weather was all we could wish; but the settler encounters many difficulties over that trail with tree stumps, ruts and stones, not to omit muskegs and hills, so hard on the poor willing horse and ox. However, we were more fortunate than some, as the trip was shorter and accompanied with fewer difficulties than we had experienced on former occasions. The government has spent a great deal of money in improving the Edson trail, and in winter, if sleighing is good, many of the troubles vanish, but alas, the heavy rains of last summer made the trail almost impassable. Some of the settlers heading for Grande Prairie, having had to cache their supplies in the bush by the way-side and walk themselves, forgetful that the appetite increases with the open air life, might have perished on the trail, but for the timely aid of a survey camp, or other travellers who came to their assistance.

"Nurse Baird, who came out for three years, expressed a wish for a little rest and change, and as Mr. Forbes was able to get a graduate nurse to take her place, she travelled out with us, her only way to get a well earned holiday. Mr. Forbes had a light caboose built with double bed for the nurse and myself, laying his own bed on the floor. The furnishings were: a small cook-stove, folding table and grub-box.

"We started out with a good snow-clad trail. The supplies for the trail were all prepared beforehand. Potatoes cooked, mashed and made into patties, meat in the same way, then put out on boards to freeze, beans boiled and frozen, all else in the same way, even milk frozen in small dishes, turned out, and all put in sacks and thrown on the load, and only to heat up when hunger calls. We made our bread into buns—they are easier handled when frozen in this form. When required they are dipped in cold water, put in the oven, and you have fresh buns!

"We had travelled sixteen miles when alas! at our first meal, we wakened to the fact that we were minus bread. Mr. Forbes tried to get a team, that one could go back for the

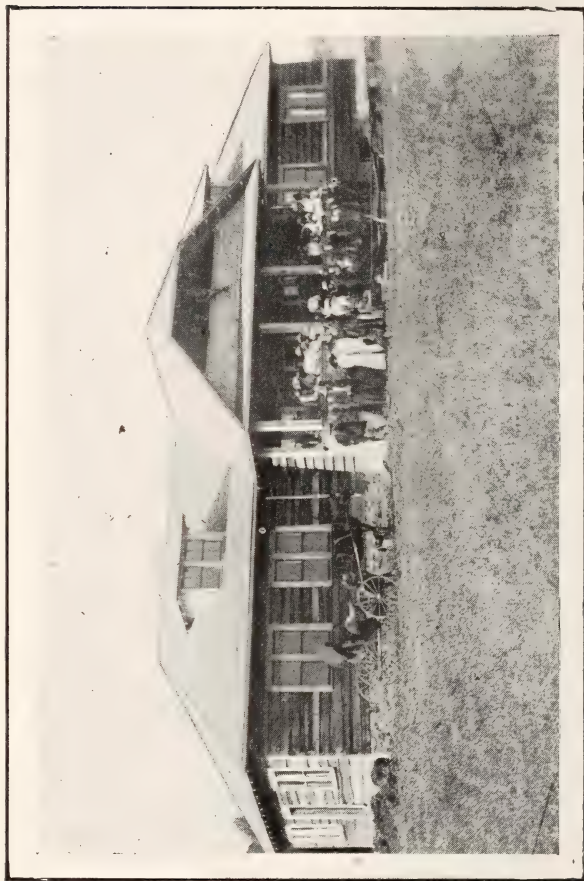
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'staff of life,' but there was none to be had. However, a bachelor who had reached the same stopping place came to the rescue with three lovely loaves, and at different points we got supply, so when the journey ended, like the widow's barrel of meal and cruise of oil, we had a loaf and a half to spare.

"When we reached the ninety mile (from Edson) stopping-place, the snow had disappeared and travelling by sleigh was impossible. There were many camping there that night. In the morning a few turned back; those going to Edson exchanged with those heading for Grande Prairie wheels for sleighs, so that difficulties might be overcome. Mr. Forbes had previously secured a wagon at seventy miles. Putting the four-in-hand on the caboose drew it over the bare ground for twenty miles. We all walked the twenty miles, ten miles each day for two days, reaching the seventy mile stopping-place at sundown of the second day. The remainder of the journey was taken in a lumber wagon with comparative comfort.

"The first night we camped in an empty shack by the way-side with earthen floor. There were two buildings; in one a surveyor had a collapsible cook stove where he prepared our evening meal; in the other a heater, here the men took turn about in hewing firewood. We shall ever remember the kind-hearted bachelors who erected a canvas partition to form a private room for the three women travelling with them, one of them giving up his double bed mattress that we might spend the night in comfort. We rolled our fur coats under our heads for pillows, and lay down to sleep soundly, never once stopping to think of the unswept, dirty, dingy shack; but of the kind hearts that prompted the comfortable bed and secured for us a good night's rest. The second night we reached a nice stopping-place, where we had a bed and good meals. Next day we arrived at Edson where a warm welcome awaited us from the kindest of friends, Mr. and Mrs. Fulmer. Two days more and we reached Edmonton by rail, where Dr. McQueen met us at the station with an auto, and soon we were in the manse, surrounded by love and comfort. I had suffered so much from rheumatism before leaving the Prairie, but I have

AGNES SORREL FORBES



“The Katherine H. Prettie Hospital,” Grande Prairie

THE WORK IN GRANDE PRAIRIE

come to the conclusion that the Edson trail heals all ills, for the open air life wrought a perfect cure."

The W. H. M. Society having considered the situation voted a sum of money to erect a new separate Hospital, to which an additional sum was contributed by Mr. and Mrs. Prittie, of Toronto, in memory of a daughter who had recently died. The building was to be called "The Katherine Prittie Hospital." The site on which the Hospital is built was donated by Mr. Forbes. It is on rising ground overlooking the town, with the snow-capped peaks of the Rockies visible from the verandah. Mr. and Mrs. Forbes were most generous with their time and money. Mr. Forbes received generous assistance from a number of the men in and around Grande Prairie who went with him into the woods, 25 miles away, where they cut and hauled 200 of the finest logs for the hospital. Once again Mrs. Forbes provided generous meals for the men who assisted in the building of the Hospital.

It was a red letter day when the hospital was opened, especially for Mrs. Forbes and Miss Baird. The opening ceremony which was attended by a large number of people was very impressive. At the close a resolution of appreciation and thanks was passed to the Women's Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church for their generosity to the people of Grande Prairie.

Miss Baird remained in charge for a few months longer. Since she left different nurses have taken charge, and the work has grown and gone on successfully.

When released from the more arduous duties of the old Hospital, Mrs. Forbes was able to devote more time to the ever-increasing duties of the congregation. Besides Sunday School work, in which she was greatly interested, she organized a W. H. M. Society, gathering the women of the Church together for the Master's work, and social intercourse. It still continues faithful to the missionary cause and to her memory.

At the outbreak of the war Mrs. Forbes' tender motherly heart went out in sympathy to those whose boys went overseas. Rarely a "Boy" went out from Grande Prairie without a blessing and a remembrance from her, and few mails left that did

AGNES SORREL FORBES

not carry something to comfort or cheer some one in the service.

In 1916 Mrs. Forbes attended the meeting of the General Council, held in Winnipeg, where she received a loving and gracious welcome.

She was invited to address a number of Missionary Societies in the city on her work. It was a time of rare enjoyment to her and she lived on the mountain top in fellowship with kindred souls engaged in the same work to which she had given her life.

It was the writer's great pleasure to journey to and from Winnipeg with her. On the way to Edmonton she had a copy of "The Life of Mary Slessor," just published, and was exceedingly happy in reading of the work of her old friend. Together we discussed it and I asked her if she ever considered writing her own life story. Her reply was: "I may do so some day, when I get time." But God ruled otherwise. He has written her wonderful life history in her work. On reaching Edmonton she gave tender and prayerful sympathy to aching hearts bereft of loved ones by the war. She returned to her work with renewed strength and fresh inspiration for the daily task, and we who loved her saw her no more.

Such was the beauty and strength of the life of this queen among women, who side by side with her husband laid the foundations of Presbyterianism in this part of our great new land. Her manse, like herself was ever the personification of daintiness and neatness, and she made it home for weary mothers and lonely homesick boys. Her Christian sympathy and aid were given to people of all creeds because of her love for the Master she served.

It is not surprising that, when the call came to her on August 17th, 1918, the hearts of all in this wide country were filled with sorrow and a sense of great loss. Her manner of passing is fittingly expressed in this extract from a tribute by Rev. R. G. MacBeth, of Vancouver: "And now there comes the news from the northland that Mrs. Forbes, who so nobly, so unselfishly and gallantly supported all her husband's effort,

THE WORK IN GRANDE PRAIRIE

as well as inaugurating some new undertakings herself, has passed away to her reward. The manner of her passing is characteristic. Though not feeling well on Sabbath, she attended both services and the Sabbath School, where she was ever a leading worker. On Monday morning she excused herself from the breakfast table and within a few minutes, gently and without struggle or fear, passed into the rest that remaineth for the people of God."

The Rev. Wm. Simons, Home Mission Superintendent, says: "The scene at her funeral which was conducted by Rev. Dr. McQueen of Edmonton and other Presbyterian and Anglican clergymen, was touching beyond power of expression. Every place of business was closed and blinds drawn during the afternoon. The procession would have filled the Church three times over, comprising Protestant and Catholic, white man and half breed, people who had left their harvesting and driven 30 miles to pay their last respects to one who had been a mother to the community. 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.' "

Mrs. McQueen, Edmonton, says in "The Evangel in our Hospitals":—"All honor to the women who have made it possible to give these hospitals to our Canadian people as at Grande Prairie, where the scattered settlers of all nationalities have been blessed by the ministrations of our nurses and hospitals through the influence of the late Mrs. Forbes, who found on her arrival neither doctor nor nurse. At her death the whole Prairie knew of her and of the hospital, and that together they stood for service and sacrifice, in a more impressive way than any flag or steeple, for it was engraven on the hearts of men and women and of their children. 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these ye have done it unto Me.' "

There are many tributes to her memory.

A tablet erected by the Fort Saskatchewan congregation takes the form of a brass shield mounted on oak on which is the following inscription:

AGNES SORREL FORBES

To the Glory of God and in Memory of
Agnes Sorrel Forbes,
Beloved wife of Rev. A. Forbes, D.D.,
Who departed this life August 27th, 1917.
Fort Saskatchewan, 1895-1909.
Grande Prairie, 1910-1917.

A beautifully engraved and embossed Honorarium, presented by the W. H. M. S. expresses acknowledgment and appreciation of her service to the Society.

The W. M. S. of Grande Prairie supports a girl in India in memory of Mrs. Forbes.

The I. O. D. E., Junior Chapter, is called "The Agnes Forbes."

The Mission Band that has outgrown itself was "The Agnes Forbes."

The W. M. S., organized by her at Glen Leslie, was "The Agnes Forbes."

The X-Ray machine in the Katherine Prittie Hospital was given to it by the community, in her memory.

A lectureship, called "The Agnes Sorrel Forbes," has been established in Robertson College, Edmonton.

These are the visible memorials. The invisible and eternal is the life work and influence of her who so nobly did her part in laying the foundations of our Empire and of the Empire that knows no ending.

In Memory of Agnes Sorrel Forbes, Our Pioneer Missionary in Grande Prairie

All honor to the gallant host
Of those, who led the Gospel van,
In frontier town and lone outpost,
Where some fierce torrent heedless ran.

Treking across the boundless waste
Of prairie, o'er some wind-swept trail,
In search of souls, as one in haste,
Who followed hard the "Holy Grail,"

Mercy's sweet angel oft was she
In shack and hospital afar,
Her life a ceaseless ministry
Pointing to Christ like some fixed star.

The "Lady of the Lamp" indeed,
To Indian child by fever fanned,
A strength to others in their need,
Who craved the touch of her kind hand.

She journeyed many a toilsome mile,
A friend to all, the learned, the poor,
The stranger stopped to see her smile,
No traveller turned from her door.

Such, and far more, was she, who lies
In glorious grave by Grande Prairie,
Her life a willing sacrifice
To God for frail humanity.

H. ISABEL GRAHAM,

Feb. 14th, 1918.

Seaforth, Ontario.

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